

Some Conditions of Missionary Life in China



A Chinese Cooper

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OUR MISSIONARY ENVIRONMENT IN CHINA

The most obtrusive characteristic of the Chinese people is the stolid and immovable conservatism which has opposed itself to the enlightenment and improvements that have been knocking at their gate for more than half a century from the nations of the West. There is method in China's madness in this matter, however, for preserving as she has done, almost unchanged, the way of doing things inaugurated by the founder of her nation, who is reputed to have been the grandson of Noah, the transition to new ways, which must come sooner or later, will involve a revolution that can hardly be accomplished without a violent disruption of the present social order. Meanwhile, those who would like to see what Oriental life was like, at least as far back as the days of Abraham, can do so by paying a visit to the Celestial Empire. If this visit be long postponed, however, New China will have come upon the stage and the opportunity of seeing Old China will be gone.

The best part of China as respect both soil and people is the region of the Yangtse valley which is the field of our Southern Presbyterian

Mission. If you will assist me by the use of the faculty of imagination, I will endeavor to show you some of the things to be seen in this region, which constitute what may be called our Missionary Environment.

RURAL SCENES.

For a view of the country we will take our stand on one of the hilltops that are found at frequent intervals along the river banks. From this view point the great valley spreads out before us as far as the eye can reach. It is the largest and most fertile body of valley land to be found in one body anywhere in the world. It is dotted all over with villages, hundreds of them in plain view from our hilltop, their adobe houses reminding us, as we watch the yellow-skinned people coming out and going in, of a multitude of great yellow ant hills. Between the villages are the little farms of from one to three acres in extent, one of which will furnish a fairly adequate food supply for the average Chinese family. These farms are enclosed in a network of canals, which serve to irrigate the crops, and as highways of travel instead of roads. These canals are crowded with house boats and rice boats and foot boats and wood rafts and small junks, driven by sails or pulled by ropes or sculled by a single oar that works with a motion like that of a fish's tail. Along the canal banks we see a multitude of stone structures of two upright pieces with two transverse pieces at the top, more or less ar-

tistically carved and covered with inscriptions. These are memorial arches of those who have given some extraordinary evidence of the virtue which the Chinese have exaggerated into a vice, and which they call "filial piety;" most of them in memory of young women whose betrothed husbands died, and who gave the supreme evidence of filial piety by leaving their own homes and devoting themselves to the service of the mother-in-law that was to have been, or, better still, by joining their betrothed in the spirit world through the door of suicide.

Out in the rice fields and bean patches, and coming and going on the tow-paths, are the people, like the stars of heaven for multitude, not one in a thousand of whom has ever had a dream or an aspiration beyond that of three meals of rice a day, seasoned with a few vegetables and a little salt fish. They are hard featured, curious, unsympathetic, and ungracious, and they flock to a foreigner, and close him in, if he comes anywhere in reach, like ants to a piece of bread. One of the least enticing phases of missionary life in China is that you can never get away from these people. They encompass you like a suffocating atmosphere, which one feels at times to be intolerable, but can in nowise escape from. The missionary can only fortify himself against the nervous irritation it produces by nursing visions of the time when, at the end of his eight years' term, he will be able to renew his vitality by breathing once more the air of

his native woods and hills. In China he feels at times that one breath of these were worth a king's ransom.

The hill on which we stand and all the surrounding hills are cemeteries, where grave mounds have been accumulating for four thousand years, until they lie as thick almost as they can lie, one against another; and in the mulberry groves on the canal banks, and on every rising ground in the fields are the heavy wooden coffins, holding the unburied bodies of those who died too poor to afford the luxury of interment, or who have been waiting for months, or perhaps years, for a rascally luck doctor, supported by the family, to find them a fortunate place for burial.

So far as rural life is concerned, it is difficult to tell whether the most depressing influences are those that come from the presence of the living or the dead.

A CHINESE CITY.

Of the average Chinese city it may be said that it is an amazing revelation, to one who sees it for the first time, of the conditions in which it is possible for human beings to exist and thrive. The Chinese say:

"Above is the palace of heaven;
Below are Hangchow and Soochow."

Beautiful for situation is Hangchow, overlooked by rocky hills that duplicate themselves in the clear waters of the West Lake that lies between them and the city. But as for the city itself, it is fortunate for its native in-

habitants that their ideas of what is pleasant and delightful in a city are exactly the reverse of ours.

Its main street is about ten feet wide, but the other streets have an average width of seven feet.

As one looks up the street the most obtrusive feature in the prospect is the long row of painted and gilded sign boards hanging perpendicularly in front of the shop doors on either side. The houses are usually two-storied, the upper stories being the homes of the people, and the lower ones their shops and stores. Across from the upper windows, above the gilded sign boards, ropes are stretched, on which are hung blue cotton trousers and petticoats galore, for such an airing as the atmosphere of Hangchow affords. The interiors of the shops and stores are of the most varied and contracted character. In one of them you will see displayed the finest and most richly-colored silks and satins and embroideries in the world. Next door you will see those same silks being woven by the untidiest of women on an old ramshackle loom that creaks and threatens to fall down at every stroke of the batten. An ivory shop, filled with carvings of such beauty and delicacy as only Chinese patience and deftness of finger can produce, stands next door to an auction room for unwashed, second-hand clothing, or old rags. Next door to this is a tea shop, where a great crowd is gathered to gossip and smoke and gamble with dice and

dominoes and fighting crickets, or, with endless chatter and gesticulation, to settle a half-dozen neighborhood quarrels at one time. Opium dens are appallingly frequent, half concealed, but revealing their presence by the emission of their sickening odors. Entering the court of a Buddhist temple, once imposing with its massive timbers and the graduated ascent of its paved approaches, but looking old and dingy now, its glory long departed, we see a few irreverent worshippers performing before the idols, but a great crowd finding entertainment in the performances of the professional story-teller, the juggler, the ventriloquist, or going into or coming out of the booths where every conceivable kind of humbug sideshow is in full blast. If we stay there long, we shall find ourselves the greatest side-show of all, and most inconveniently hustled by a crowd whose idea of the dignity of an American citizen is expressed by the greeting, "Where did you come from, you old red-bristled foreign devil?"

Out in the little narrow street are the thousands and tens of thousands of the people, jamming and jostling each other in what seems to be, but is not, an impracticable effort to get where they are going, and mingled in what seems to be, but is not, inextricable confusion. An embroidered sedan is loaded with a fat mandarin in silk robes and huge spectacles in tortoise-shell frames, his head bobbing to the motion of his carriers, portentous in his dignity, sublimely unconscious of his absurdity.

A creaking wheel-barrow is loaded with three half-naked coolies on one side and three ugly black pigs on the other. The man with the bamboo pole across his shoulders transports by ropes suspended from either end of it every conceivable kind of burden; the traveler's luggage, boxes of merchandise, a movable restaurant, baskets of fresh cabbage and turnips, or of eggs that once were fresh, but, as likely as not, are now far gone in the process of transformation into sulphuretted hydrogen. Most pitiful of all to see are the women hobbling along on their poor little stumps of bound feet, many of them carrying in their arms, or strapped to their backs, from one to three very gaily dressed, but very dirty faced and mangy headed children. Most forlorn and wretched looking, but most useful in their office of street scavengers, are the dogs, as bitterly anti-foreign as the literati, but whose superstitious fear of the foreigner is luckily stronger than their hate, so that as we pass along they first rush out with a furious bark and then immediately tuck tail and disappear behind the scenes. Seemingly impossible indeed, the situation becomes when, in the midst of all this jam and jumble, a wedding procession going one way meets a funeral procession going the other. But in the long course of their experience the Chinses have wisely come to an understanding about some things, and one of these is as to who has the right of way in the street. And so, incredible as it would seem, they all manage somehow to work their

way along and, for anything we ever hear to the contrary, to reach their appointed destinations."

Another thing, of which we are likely to see several in the course of a morning, is a Chinese street quarrel, which differs from all other quarrels as everything Chinese differs from the same thing everywhere else in the world. We observe two men walking side by side engaged in a conversation which grows more and more animated as they proceed. They are probably exchanging opinions as to which of their respective mothers was the most disreputable character in Chinese history. In the space of half a mile they have wrought themselves into a perfect frenzy of rage. Their voices have assumed a tone to which the grating of a shovel on the hearth is music. Finally, one of them gives utterance to a sentiment whose vileness of expression and comprehensive breadth of uncomplimentary implication the other cannot hope to rival, whereupon the victor receives the plaudits of the crowd, and the vanquished, having "lost face," retires to grieve over his discomfiture. I was told that these quarrels rarely had any practical result beyond a little harmless pulling of queues, but I saw with my own eyes three first-class fisticuffs grow out of them, from which both parties emerged with ugly knots on their heads, and after which I confess that my respect for the Chinses and my hopes for the future of their nation were both considerably enlarged.

Last and most picturesque of all things to be seen in this unique street life is the professional beggar. He is a privileged character, belonging to a guild that protects his interests, for which protection he pays an initiation fee of thirty Mexican dollars, equal to \$15 of our money. For an equipment, his face is covered with something worse than ordinary mud. His gray blouse, coming to the knees and frayed at the edges, is stiff with that upon which he has been lying in the street. The part of his person exposed to view is covered with boils and ulcers. His plan of campaign is to promenade the street, stopping before each shop door, going through various contortions and singing a lugubrious tune, with a view of making himself so disagreeable that no customer will enter the shop while he stands there. When the reluctant shopkeeper at last capitulates by handing him out a cash, the beggar magnanimously raises the siege and moves on to the next shop. Over some shop doors you will see a piece of paper pasted, with an inscription to the effect that a fee has been paid to the beggars' guild, in consideration of which that shopkeeper is to have immunity from their solicitations for the space of twelve months.

Time fails to tell of the thousand other things that enter into this amazing and bewildering conglomerate of life in the streets of a Chinese city. It is intensely interesting to one who sees it for the first time and passes on to other scenes. But as a permanent feature of

our missionary environment it has a tendency to grow monotonous, and to have the reverse of a tonic effect on missionary nerves.

MODES OF TRAVEL.

While the missionaries have their headquarters in the cities, most of the men, and some of the women, spend much of their time itinerating among the smaller towns and villages. Therefore, the available modes of travel become an important feature of their environment.

In Central China the canals take the place of roads, and the principal means of locomotion is the house boat. By carrying your own bed and chair and provisions, and something to read and a supply of pennyroyal and insect powder, one can enjoy life fairly well on a house boat, provided he is not restless on the score of speed. A rice boat is a smaller, but speedier craft, but is not to be recommended for a rainy night. Its covering is a piece of bamboo matting, open at both ends and usually well supplied with holes, so that you can get full benefit of both the rain and wind. We asked our boatman if he had any bugs on board. He said, "Yes, a couple, but they are family bugs, and will not draw nigh you." "Any mosquitoes?" Answer, "None if you keep moving; but if you stop, one and a half." Our faith in his assurance was not great, but we did keep moving, and if either the two bugs or the one and a half mosquitoes did draw nigh

us, it was while we were asleep, and they did not succeed in waking us.

But when a boat will not take you where you wish to go, then the problem of locomotion becomes like that in the case of the Arkansas traveler, who was told, you remember, that whichever way he went, he would not go far before he would wish he had gone some other way. In the Northern provinces they have the "mule litter" and the famous two-wheeled cart drawn by two mules tandem. Of the cart I did not have personal experience, but I was told that the wheels were usually only partially encompassed by the tire, and that in combination with Chinese roads, it is the most perfect device yet framed by man for discovering the exact location of every joint and bone in the human body. The wheel-barrow I had a very small experience of, but, small as it was, I have not since felt the slightest ambition to have it enlarged. The Chinses never lubricate their wheel-barrows, because, they say, "noise is cheaper than oil." You sit on the side of it, with one foot extended in front and the other supported by a rope stirrup. To maintain one's position with dignity when the driver pushes you in his energetic way across a gully, requires the most rapid power of adjustment, as well as forethought and presence of mind. As a device for teaching one to appreciate the luxury of walking, the Chinese wheelbarrow is incomparable. In all the Orient today, as in the days of Isaac and Jacob, the donkey is a favorite instrument of transportation.

I rode one from Nankin five miles out to the Ming tombs; but going back I preferred to walk through the broiling sun. Nothing in China is exactly like the same thing anywhere else in the world. Whether it be man or animal, the power of heredity working through milleniums of isolation, with no modification from foreign admixture, has developed in every case something that is peculiar to China. The donkey is no exception to this rule. His gait is a rough jog, instead of an easy amble. Our American donkey's bray, we know, is a unique phenomenon in the realm of sound. But that of the Chinese donkey has a quality all its own. It was that, even more than his gait, which distressed me and made me rather walk than ride him. There are no words in English to describe the heart-rendering pathos of it. It was as if an appeal to heaven against the cruelty and oppression of ages were at last finding utterance in one long, loud, undulating wail. And when our party of three met another party of six, and all nine of the donkeys began at one time to exchange the compliments of the day, then pathos gave place to terror, and one could only sit appalled and trembling as the mighty reverberation rolled away on its journey round the world.

The name of the Chinese inn I had experience of was inscribed over the door in a character which signified "House of excellent felicity." Its guest room had a door opening without a shutter, through which the mul-

titudinous Chinese public were privileged to come in and inspect us and our belongings to their heart's content. It had a dirt floor, and its walls and roof were frescoed with dirt and cobwebs. It had one piece of furniture in the shape of a platform in one corner, with a piece of ragged and dirty straw matting spread over it for a bed. The one felicitous feature of it, from our standpoint, was that the charge for six hours' occupancy of the room and dinner for three of us was only seven cents of our money.

MISSIONARY HOMES.

If Shakespeare could have visited in some of the missionary homes in China, he would have had a new conception of a thing to describe as shining "like a good deed in a naughty world." It is the wise policy of most missions to build comfortable houses for their members, and with the nice tableware and *bric-a-brac* ornaments that are to be had in the Orient for a trifle, it is easy with a small outlay to make a sweet and attractive home. Such homes all missionaries ought to have if possible, to which they may go when their day's work is over and find rest from the nerve strain that one can see must be incident to work in the conditions I have described. But it is not always possible to have such homes. In opening a new station it usually takes a year, or sometimes two and three years, of negotiating and battling with the authorities to buy a piece of ground. After that comes the expe-

rience of the leisureliness with which Oriental carpenters carry out a building contract. During this time the missionary, glad to get a foothold of any kind, contents himself with such accommodations as he may be able to secure. I saw in the outskirts of Kiashing the little three-roomed mud hovel where two of our missionaries spent one whole winter, without kindling a fire, except under the dirt oven where they cooked their meals, because there was nowhere else to kindle it. The nights were sometimes so cold and the atmosphere so damp that the icicles would collect upon their whiskers which they let grow for the protection of their throats and faces. At Wusih I found two missionary families living in ramshackle native houses fronting on a filthy street eight feet wide, with the rear windows hanging over a filthy canal.

But, no matter what kind of exterior surroundings, nor interior comforts or discomforts there might be, I found the inside of every missionary home I visited to be a place of brightness and cheer. So far from complaining of their physical hardships are they that, as we know, when they come back to us, lest they might seem to be complaining, they shrink from even telling us the facts of the case. Neither are they unhappy on account of them. They are absorbed and happy in their work. And it is evidently true with most of them that, by emptying their hearts of worldly ambitions and the care for worldly comforts, there has only been made the great-

er room in them for the blessings of that kingdom which "is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." One thing I think they crave to know of us who remain at home—that we cherish them in our hearts, that we remember them in our prayers, and that we are resolved to support them in the work which is ours as well as theirs, and for which they have laid their lives upon the altar as a sacrifice, acceptable, well pleasing to God.

